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Testing the Feasibility of a Quality Label for Professional Higher Education Excellence (PHEXcel)

Final Report

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Executive Summary

At present, higher education in Europe is facing the challenge of implementing a process of continuous quality enhancement across educational programmes and organisational structures. This takes on a particular set of characteristics when considering higher education that integrates with the world of work, so-called professional higher education. Improved performance in this regard is linked to the same quality assurance processes that apply to the whole of higher education, yet it is equally answerable to the 'professional' perspective. It thus finds itself in a state of tension between these two priorities; which adds a distinctive dimension to the challenge of quality enhancement. Over the years, many higher education institutions have specialised in integrating with the world of work, from universities of applied sciences to subjects falling under professional legal requirements (e.g. nursing). Yet, in recent years it has become more widespread and all providers of higher education are, in one form or another, aiming to integrate with the world of work.

On the other hand, excellence is a 'hot topic' in higher education worldwide. It is used in funding schemes by several authorities and its relevance has risen in recent years through (international) rankings and sectorial initiatives such as quality labels or accreditation. Many in higher education are struggling to cope with a concept that is often used with very different meanings and aims.

The overall objective of the PHExcel project¹ has therefore been to find ways to support, develop, improve and enhance excellence in professional higher education in Europe. We set out to achieve this by designing and testing a quality framework for professional higher education excellence accompanied by a methodology to assess excellence.

EURASHE, the leader of the PHExcel project, is the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education that offer professionally orientated programmes and are engaged in applied and profession-related research within the Bologna cycles. As the representative of professional higher education in the Bologna Process and as a consultative member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), EURASHE is in a unique position in the higher education community debates.

Based on consultations within its membership and with partners, EURASHE gathered representatives of 4 sectors of higher education (arts, business and languages, music, and nursing) and other partners to lead the PHExcel initiative. The partners are the Association Européenne des Conservatoires (AEC), the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA), and the SPACE Network for Business Studies and Languages (SPACE), Jagiellonian University in Krakow (JG), the University of Nottingham (UNOTT) representing the European Federation of Nurse Educators (FINE), and finally the Knowledge Innovation Centre Malta (KIC-Malta).

Our aim through this project was to support institutions providing professional higher education in the development and enhancement of excellence in the professional aspects of their processes. This comes in addition to current schemes specifically addressing the academic components of higher education. We built our work on the identified characteristics of professional higher education from the HAPHE project.²

¹ See www.phexcel.org

² Harmonising Approaches to Professional Higher Education in Europe (HAPHE), 527842-LLP-1-2012-1-BE-ERASMUS-EMGR, see <http://haphe.eurashe.eu>

We set out to test the feasibility of a quality label for professional higher education excellence. **The PHEExcel project has now been successfully completed.**

First, we researched existing quality labels and models by analysing 46 tools as to their relation to characteristics of professional higher education and as to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).³ This analysis is compiled in the report on *Quality Tools for Professional Higher Education Review and Improvement*. This research showed that there are currently no tools fully addressing excellence and the main characteristic of professional higher education, the integration with the world of work in all aspects (governance, education, and research).

Following consultations and debates with experts in the field, the second phase of the project resulted in a *Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence*. Next to it, a *Briefing Paper on Excellence* presents the state-of-the-art on the topic of excellence and its assessment. The draft framework comprises the presentation of professional higher education excellence, a set of domains and characteristics of excellence, and an introduction into the assessment methodology. In parallel, the assessment methodology has been fully detailed in a separate draft document: *Principles and Guidelines for Assessing and Recognising PHE Excellence*.

We went on to test and consult on these draft outcomes. We conducted four pilot visits on excellence in four institutions and programmes in Europe. In parallel, we conducted a consultation on the framework and methodology through a survey, interviews and a stakeholders' validation workshop. This led us to the *Report on a Consultation on Excellence* presenting amongst others the assessment of the characteristics of the quality framework and methodology. The report also considers the 'market' in which the quality framework and methodology would be deployed. Finally, the report presents some options that are open for a tool supporting institutions that strive for excellence.

After over two years of research, development, testing and consultations, we can reply to our original question: is a label for excellence feasible? **We believe that indeed such a label is technically feasible, however it would not be a welcome development.**

Considering all the options open to achieve our main goal of supporting excellence, we came to the conclusion that such a label is not best suited to accompany institutions in their strive for excellence.

We presented our outcomes to the higher education community throughout the span of the project and in our final conference. The reflections on excellence of the PHEExcel project were welcomed in the current debates, reinforcing our position that the format of a label is not the best suited to assess and support excellence.

Yet, we believe that there is a way forward for higher education institutions in addressing excellence in their higher education provision. This can be achieved through a supportive open consultative process that we are now proposing as an outcome of our project. We present this vision in our *PHEExcel Framework & Methodology*.

We aim to further study and gain more knowledge on this process in the months and years to come, to fully and effectively support higher education institutions that strive for excellence.

³ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium, available at: www.eurashe.eu/library/esg_2015-pdf

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1. Project Objectives

The overall objective of the PHEExcel project is to support, develop, improve and enhance excellence in professional higher education in Europe.

Specifically, the project aimed to:

- Identify, through a gap analysis, to which extent European quality tools respond to the identified characteristics of professional higher education;
- Develop the concept of excellence for professional higher education, accompanied by characteristics of excellence;
- Support institutions that strive for excellence through the proposal of a methodology for review;
- Validate the proposed quality framework by conducting pilot tests in institutions;
- Build consensus around the proposed quality framework through consultation with key stakeholders, e.g. staff, students, world of work, policy-makers;
- Determine the best way to sustainably support institutions that strive for excellence in Europe;
- Mainstream the concept of professional higher education excellence in Europe.

The PHEExcel project achieved this with:

- A report on *Quality Tools For Professional Higher Education Review And Improvement*,⁴ and an online comparison tool;⁵
- A *Briefing Paper on Excellence*;⁶ and a *Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence*,⁷ finalised in the *PHEExcel Framework and Methodology*;
- Preliminary *Principles and Guidelines for Assessing and Recognising PHE Excellence*,⁸ finalised in the *PHEExcel Framework and Methodology*;
- Four pilot visits in Wrocław (Poland), Limerick (Ireland), Lisbon (Portugal) and Kaunas (Lithuania);

⁴ (PHEExcel) Jørgensen M. D., Kristensen R. S., Wipf A., Delplace S., (2014), *Quality Tools For Professional Higher Education Review And Improvement*, Brussels, ISBN: 978-99957-843-0-0, available at: www.eurashe.eu/library/phexcel_quality-tools-for-phe-review-and-improvement_2014-pdf

⁵ See www.phexcel.org/about/quality-tools

⁶ (PHEExcel) Wipf A., Cloet J., Delplace, S., (2014), *Briefing Paper on Excellence*, available at: www.eurashe.eu/library/phexcel_briefing-paper-on-excellence_2014-pdf

⁷ PHEExcel, (2015), *Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence*, available at: www.eurashe.eu/library/phexcel_draft-quality-framework-for-phe-excellence-feb2015-pdf

⁸ (PHEExcel) Ebert L., (2015), *Principles and Guidelines for Assessing and Recognising PHE Excellence*, available at: www.eurashe.eu/library/phexcel_principles-and-guidelines-for-assessing-and-recognising-phe-excellence_2015-pdf

- A consultation on excellence (survey, interviews, validation workshop) summarised into a *Report on a Consultation on Excellence*;⁹
- The final *PHEXcel Framework & Methodology*,¹⁰ and considerations for further implementation through plans for the future;
- A final conference on 'Striving for Excellence in Higher Education: Bringing Education and the World of Work Together'¹¹ and extensive dissemination and contribution to the debates on excellence throughout the project.

⁹ (PHEXcel) Wipf A., Cloet J., (2015), Report on a Consultation on Excellence, available at: www.eurashe.eu/library/phexcel_report-on-a-consultation-on-excellence_sep2015-pdf/

¹⁰ PHEXcel, (2015), PHEXcel Framework & Methodology, available at: www.eurashe.eu/library/phexcel_framework-methodology_nov2015-pdf-2

¹¹ See www.eurashe.eu/phexcel-conference

2. Project Approach

The PHEExcel project conducted its activities in four phases:

1. Researching Excellence in (Professional) Higher Education
2. Developing a Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence
3. Testing, Evaluating, and Validating the Draft Quality Framework
4. Proposing a Solution for Institutions Striving for Excellence

1. Researching Excellence in (Professional) Higher Education

The first phase of the PHEExcel project conducted **extensive research** into excellence in (professional) higher education. It was addressed in work package 1 of the project: Mapping Quality Aspects of Professional Higher Education in Europe, and part of work package 2: Measuring Professional Higher Education Performance.

The project conducted desk research in quality tools: quality models and labels. The research was supported by the knowledge of each partner in their specific fields as well as wide contacts with stakeholders who developed such tools. 46 quality tools were initially analysed, 19 of which were selected for further study based on their preliminary correspondence to professional higher education characteristics. All the quality tools analysed cover a wide variety of subject areas (from life sciences to public administration), they also include national frameworks (e.g. United Kingdom), as well as labels with a large use in the higher education community (e.g. engineering) and others that have been developed more recently (e.g. relating to MOOCs).

Further, PHEExcel looked into how the concept of excellence is addressed in quality tools currently in use. A typology of quality tools was created, which allowed for a comparison between the several tools available for higher education institutions.

We analysed current quality labels in use in European (professional) higher education, and the extent to which they respond to the identified characteristics of professional higher education through a gap analysis. As mentioned previously, these characteristics had been first defined through the EURASHE-led HAPHE project.

Additionally, we looked at how these quality tools respect and adhere to the basis of European quality assurance: the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, or European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in short.

Through this extensive research, we identified gaps in coverage of elements specific to professional higher education that have then been addressed in the proposed quality framework. It is summarised in the report on *Quality Tools For Professional Higher Education Review And Improvement*.

In work package 2 we have developed a *Briefing Paper on Excellence* that analyses the state of the art of excellence in higher education debates. This document based on desk research served to kick-off the discussions in the group of experts that developed the draft quality framework and methodology.

By conducting first research into the state of the art of excellence in (professional) higher education in Europe, the project made sure to stay relevant and address the latest topics and issues raised.

2. Developing a Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence

The second phase of the PHExcel project was based on **expert consultations** for the development of the concept of 'professional higher education excellence'. It was addressed in work package 2: Measuring Professional Higher Education Performance.

This work was conducted through consultations with an expert group, where project partners were represented next to a majority of external experts in European higher education and quality assurance. Institutions and all stakeholders were included in this expert group: from students to the world of work, as well as accreditation and quality assurance agencies.

The experts consulted developed the draft quality framework for professional higher education excellence based on the briefing paper highlighting the state of the art in three identified steps. These three steps addressed first the concept of excellence, then possible characteristics of professional higher education excellence, and finally the selection of an adequate methodology for professional higher education excellence reviews. The expert group met three times in Brussels (Belgium) on 23-24 June 2014 and on 9-10 September 2014 and finally in Amsterdam (Netherlands) on 1-2 December 2014.

The first step aimed at proposing an understanding of professional higher education excellence. In its draft (and final) format, it recognises the unicity of higher education, as well as the diversity of higher education systems in Europe, and presents the intense integration with the world of work as the cornerstone of excellence in professional higher education. Finally, the group also considered the fact that excellence is contextual and dynamic per nature.

The second step aimed at proposing a set of characteristics of excellence. This work was based on the initial work of the HAPHE project and refined through the discussions of the expert group. The discussions in the group, considering excellence as the way in which one goes above and beyond a defined set of quality thresholds, led to propose areas for reflection in which excellence should be considered. The expert group stated that these characteristics are per definition not exhaustive as excellence is highly contextual.

The third and final step aimed at proposing a methodology for reviewing excellence. Practically, a user-oriented method that is applicable in practice and that ensures that excellence is present in professional higher education. In turn, this methodology should also support the development and enhancement of excellence. The review of current methodologies was important to see the added values of certain methods. At this draft stage, the principles of openness, support and enhancement were clearly embedded by the expert group in the draft methodology.

Through these expert consultations, we refined a concept of professional higher education excellence with principles and characteristics, and a methodology for review into a *Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence*, and preliminary *Principles and Guidelines for Assessing and Recognising PHE Excellence*.

3. Testing, Evaluating, and Validating the Draft Quality Framework

The third phase of the PHExcel project was based on **user-validation** of the proposed quality framework and review methodology. It was addressed through work packages 3 and 4 of the project: Piloting Quality-Review of Professional Higher Education Excellence; and Testing the Feasibility of a Quality Label for Professional Higher Education Excellence, respectively.

The draft quality framework and methodology were tested, evaluated and validated both in practice and in theory.

On the practical level, four pilot reviews were conducted in various settings to respond to different potential experiences. The four pilots were conducted in the four sectors represented in the PHEExcel initiative: music, arts, arts, nursing, and business and languages. The reviews took place at Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław (Poland) on 18 May 2015; Limerick School of Art & Design (LSAD) (Ireland) on 11 May 2015; Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Lisboa (ESEL), Lisbon School of Nursing (Portugal) on 6 May 2015; and V. A. Graičiūnas School of Management (Lithuania) on 16-17 April 2015. The review teams included a professional expert, an academic expert and a student. Each team was also accompanied by a representative of the project to observe the proceedings and evaluate the way in which the proposed framework and methodology worked in reality. The outcomes were analysed and discussed extensively within the partnership to refine and adapt specific points.

On the theoretical level, a public consultation, with a survey of stakeholders as well as qualitative stakeholder interviews provided feedback on the fitness for purpose of the proposed quality framework and methodology. The survey was conducted over a period of five months, from March to July 2015. The survey was extensive and addressed all questions relevant to the future deployment of a tool supporting institutions striving for excellence, such as the adequateness of specific characteristics but also more general topics such as the position of respondents towards excellence. The survey was accompanied by a validation workshop for EU-level stakeholders to gather further input; it took place in Brussels (Belgium) on 17 June 2015. In addition to the survey and to the validation workshop several other colleagues were consulted, including through individual interviews and ad-hoc meetings of representatives of each sector involved in the project.

The analysis of the survey responses, the interviews and the workshop discussions led us to analyse the ‘market’ of labels in European (professional) higher education. We conducted this study to consider the potential final format of a tool supporting institutions that strive for excellence. The outcomes of the analysis are included in the *Report on a Consultation on Excellence*.

Through this user-validation, we ensured the fitness-for-purpose of the proposed quality framework for professional higher education excellence, contributing to the long-term usefulness of the PHEExcel framework and methodology.

4. Proposing a Solution for Institutions Striving for Excellence

The fourth and final phase of the PHEExcel project was based on ensuring the **sustainability** of the quality framework, thereby proposing a solution for institutions considering excellence. It was addressed in work package 5 of the project: Leveraging the Quality Framework to Create Professional Higher Education Excellence in Professional Higher Education Institutions.

The first step of ensuring the usefulness of the work carried out until this point was to integrate all the findings from the validation process into the final proposal of a quality framework and methodology. This ensured that the views of the end-users and stakeholders were taken on board and that the framework and methodology respond to their needs. Extensive debates took place within the project team to analyse and understand precisely the perceived added-values and shortcomings of the work developed so far. This led to small adaptations in the framework itself, but also to more clarity given in the concept of excellence, as well as a more decisive approach in the methodology. These adaptations were included by project partners that participated in the initial expert group that drafted the framework. It also led to a response to the project’s question on the feasibility of a label for excellence, stating that whilst it is technically feasible it would not be the best way ahead to support excellence in higher education. The partners presented the

final *PHEXcel Framework & Methodology* to the higher education community in the project final conference.

Further, a roadmap for the implementation of the proposed framework and methodology was developed by partners. It includes steps that should support the development of the project's outcomes. Partners continued this discussion to the end of the project to ensure that a common vision was achieved and to have the best possible conditions for the future use of the *PHEXcel Framework & Methodology*.

One important aspect in proposing a solution to institutions striving for excellence is the dissemination and information-sharing aspect of the project. The framework was presented at the project final conference 'Striving for Excellence in Higher Education: Bringing Education and the World of Work Together' organised in London (United Kingdom) on 18-19 November 2015. The debates at the conference, and during other opportunities we had to present the project's outcomes, confirmed the decision of the partners not to propose a label for excellence but a supportive process.

By working on the sustainability and usefulness of the *PHEXcel Framework & Methodology* we strove to have a longer-term impact on the enhancement of quality and excellence in professional higher education and higher education as a whole, to serve all stakeholders, especially students, and the wider society better.

All this was made possible through a robust work basis on management (work package 7), dissemination (work package 6) and internal quality procedures (work package 8). The various partners have years of experience, both in European cooperation, and in project cooperation. This experience was supported by internal mechanisms of the project, whereby consultations with members of the project partners, stakeholders, and other experts ensured a continuous improvement atmosphere.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

The outcomes and results of the PHEXcel project are:

1. A Response to the Project's Question
2. Research on Excellence in (Professional) Higher Education
3. Support to Institutions Striving for Excellence
4. A Consultation on Excellence and on a Tool for Excellence
5. A Proposed Framework and Methodology for Excellence
6. Dialogue on (Professional) Higher Education Excellence

1. A Response to the Project's Question

First and foremost, the activities carried out in the PHEXcel project allowed us to know whether or not a quality label for professional higher education excellence is feasible. It led us to conclude that a label for excellence is indeed technically feasible, yet it would not be a welcome development to achieve our main goal: supporting institutions that strive for excellence.

This is the result of all the activities carried out in the project. First the research provided us with the basis for further study and with the state-of-the-art on the topic of excellence. Second the development of the draft framework and methodology with external contributions. In developing the framework, we have been faced with various options as to criteria and indicators and with the various formats that a review can take. Third, we tested and validated the framework and methodology, further gathering input and feedback from potential end-users and stakeholders. Finally, by adapting the framework and methodology based on the feedback received we came to the *PHEXcel Framework & Methodology* that is in fact proposing a supportive and enhancement-led process.

From the beginning of the project, in discussions with partners, and in order to remain impartial as to the response to the project's question, we had decided to remain open to various options and not pursue the creation of a label for the sake of it. This approach was beneficial to arrive to a result fully endorsed by all partners and with strong potential for implementation after the project lifespan.

Time and again, in our debates and exchanges on our activities and outcomes with representatives of higher education institutions and stakeholders, different positions were raised. Many see an added value to a label, mainly from, but not limited to, a 'marketing' point of view. Yet, many were also critical of the large amount of labels currently existing that do not offer any distinct approach or real enhancement to participating institutions. This confirmed our first research showing a large number of labels and models, some of which have never been awarded. The main aspect that higher education institutions looked for a tool dealing with excellence was the formative aspect, the learning process within the tool that supports institutions.

Whilst we believe that labels, including those awarded through accreditation, have a role to play, our goal of supporting institutions that strive for excellence is best achieved through an open, supportive and formative process that we have proposed in the *PHEXcel Framework & Methodology*.

2. Research on Excellence in (Professional) Higher Education

Another outcome of the PHExcel project is extensive research on the topic of excellence, which has proven to be extremely valuable in current debates.

The report on *Quality Tools for Professional Higher Education Review and Improvement* is the result of the first phase of the project. It contains the analysis of 46 quality tools, 19 of which were selected for further study based on their preliminary compliance with the identified characteristics of professional higher education. As mentioned previously it is made up of a typology of quality tools, a first gap analysis towards professional higher education characteristics and a second gap analysis towards the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). It identifies the commonalities between the selected quality tools and the way in which they address characteristics of professional higher education and the generally accepted basis for quality assurance in the EHEA, the ESG.

Data presented in the report has also been made available on the website of the project to allow for comparison by interested higher education institutions. This comes out of consultations with stakeholders of the project partners who identified a lack of information available for higher education institutions on the topic of quality labels and models.

This research laid the ground basis for our work on the concept of excellence applied to higher education that is integrating with the world of work. It shows how excellence is addressed and which tools are used in (professional) higher education. In turn, it supported the development of the draft quality framework. It also contributed to the dialogue on (professional) higher education excellence.

In this sense, the report on *Quality Tools for Professional Higher Education Review and Improvement* identifies the gaps in coverage from the side of the quality tools studied towards the identified elements of professional higher education. These gaps have been addressed in the development of the quality framework.

In developing the draft framework, the expert group in charge was supported by a *Briefing Paper on Excellence*, which summarised the latest debates and discussions around excellence: rankings, funding schemes, cooperation networks, marketing etc. The briefing paper framed the discussion by presenting past and current reflections on excellence and helped the expert group develop a framework and methodology that had the potential for added values, not simply duplicating existing processes of accreditation.

3. Support to Institutions Striving for Excellence

Higher education institutions have already received support during the project phase, before the final *PHExcel Framework & Methodology* had been published. This direct support, whilst not an intended outcome of the project, was realised in the conduction of the pilot reviews.

The main outcome of the pilots was to refine the framework and methodology by assessing their fitness for purpose. Yet, as was shown during and after the pilots, the four participating institutions and programmes found the exercise, whilst still a pilot, stimulating.

When participating in the pilots, the four institutions and programmes were informed that it would primarily be beneficial to the activities of the project by helping us test our initial proposal. Yet, all eagerly took part and reflected very pointedly on their claim for excellence.

The approach taken during the pilots made the difference. When discussing the methodology in the expert group, it was decided to avoid duplicating accreditation processes and propose a more open method. For example, participants had to submit their

claim for excellence instead of following a set of criteria like a tick-box exercise. Furthermore, the review team followed specific indications and were extensively briefed not to conduct this exercise like an accreditation where participating institutions would have to prove a set of criteria but support an exchange on the topic of excellence.

Participating in the pilot helped the four institutions and programmes frame better their own claim for excellence and opened new debates within their own institutional settings.

4. A Consultation on Excellence and on a Tool for Excellence

Another outcome of the project is the consultation on excellence (survey, interviews, validation workshop) that we conducted in 2015; it has been summarised into the *Report on a Consultation on Excellence*.

The responses gathered in the survey were of high qualitative value, the sample size appeared adequate and provided appropriate representativeness. The results presented were explorative and indicative for the construct validation of the PHEXcel tool.

The focus group workshop gathered representatives of stakeholders and higher education institutions to discuss the advancement of the tool for excellence. The format allowed for the participants to have direct access to some of the creators of the tool and to two participants in the pilot assessments. The first lessons learned from the pilots were also presented to the participants. The workshop resulted in a large amount of constructive comments from stakeholders and institutions.

The report summarised this theoretical evaluation and called on other external research to support its claims. Adopting some codes of a market study, it presented the outcomes and assessment of the process as regards the characteristics of the product and considered the market in which it would be deployed. These characteristics have been addressed and evaluated based on a cross-section of comments from the survey, validation workshop and/or interview as relevant. For each specific considered characteristic we drew conclusions as to their impact on a final tool supporting institutions in their strive for excellence. Finally, it presented some options that are open for the future of the tool.

5. A Proposed Framework and Methodology for Excellence

Taking into account the testing phase of the framework and methodology alongside the conclusions from the consultation, the project partners finalised the *PHEXcel Framework & Methodology*. It details our understanding of excellence and how it is affecting institutions that put an emphasis on the integration with the world of work, i.e. professional higher education; and which methodology is best suited to support institutions in this matter.

Indeed, PHEXcel recognises that excellence is the exceptional capacity of an organisation and its members to add relevant value to input within a given context, surpassing set standards of quality. Excellence is a fluid, dynamic and highly contextual matter.

Whilst PHEXcel addresses the intense integration with the world of work, excelling in this domain means using in an outstanding manner (taking into account the national and international field) the systematic and circular relationship between education, research and professional practice.

PHEXcel is proposing a consultancy service for higher education providers that strive to excel at integrating with the world of work. Through PHEXcel, participating organisations would analyse their relationship with the world of work, and through a process of active-learning, identify areas for enhancement and develop appropriate actions. It is a problem-

client- and action-centred consultancy service. It involves organisations in a diagnostic, active-learning, problem-finding and -solving process.

The proposed tool is a quality enhancement service with focus on organisational processes. The fundamental objective of PHEXcel is to contribute to raising the standard of higher education in Europe, especially in its collaboration with the world of work. It considers the domains of policy and strategy, teaching and learning, and research, development and innovation.

PHEXcel is proposing a 3-stage process, including first a 'definition of needs visit' followed by a consultancy visit and finally a longer-term follow-up. It follows the principles of a collaborative and co-creative exercise, based on an open mutual exchange and an open atmosphere with the support of a team of coaches.

6. Dialogue on (Professional) Higher Education Excellence

Finally, by carrying out the PHEXcel project, the partners have been able to be strongly involved in current debates on excellence in higher education. Our involvement in this dialogue is, in itself, not the outcome of a specific activity. It is however a transversal result and a generic goal of the work of all PHEXcel partners as representative organisations.

As European organisations, and organisations involved in the developments of our respective fields (arts, business and language, music, and nursing), we are participating in the current debates on higher education.

This was especially the case in our exchanges within our respective memberships and networks, but also with our partners and stakeholders: student representatives, world of work organisations, and quality assurance agencies on regional, national and European level. It also included the vocational education and training sector that has shown extensive interest in our work.

Apart from continuous dissemination activities throughout the project we have been able to present the project's outcomes and exchange with the higher education community during the project's final conference 'Striving for Excellence in Higher Education: Bringing Education and the World of Work Together' in London (United Kingdom) on 18-19 November 2015. Organising the final conference in the United Kingdom at a moment when excellence in teaching and learning was on everybody's mind gave specific relevance to our activities and findings. This was also shown in presenting our findings in the 2014 and 2015 editions of the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF), the premier event in Europe on quality assurance, which dealt in 2015 with the topic of the future of quality – where excellence in general and our proposed methodology in particular could play a role.

In this sense, the project's activities enabled all partners to be at the forefront of policy debates in their respective fields and in discussions in the EHEA.

4. Partnerships

The PHEXcel partnership is composed of 7 partners from 5 European Union countries under the leadership of the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

EURASHE is the umbrella representative organisation of higher education institutions offering professional programmes. It has a unique role in the development of professional education on the European level, and influences the development of professional higher education on national and regional levels through its members. EURASHE members are national associations of higher education institutions and individual institutions, such as universities of applied sciences, (university) colleges and universities.

Three European sectorial umbrella organisations of professional higher education and two individual institutions complete the partnership. They are the Association Européenne des Conservatoires (AEC), the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA), and the SPACE Network for Business Studies and Languages (SPACE). Finally, the University of Nottingham (UNOTT), representing the European Federation of Nurse Educators (FINE), and Jagiellonian University in Krakow (JG) are also partners of the project.

These partners have an extraordinary knowledge and experience regarding the development of each sector: music education, the arts, business and language studies and nursing education respectively.

Moreover, they have expertise in strengthening the quality and quality assurance systems in professional higher education within their respective sectors and are continuously developing policies for bringing professional higher education to its full potential. Each presents a specific profile. EURASHE has been involved in the creation of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), as well as in their revision, in the set-up of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), and the organisation of the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF). AEC has developed a quality enhancement model for music education. ELIA has developed quality and enhancement services for institutions in the arts. Both have established an independent quality assurance agency focused on enhancement and support. Members of SPACE are familiar with the world best-known models and labels for quality in business schools. The University of Nottingham/FINE are subject to professional recognition of the nursing profession. The representative of Jagiellonian University in Krakow has also been involved in initiatives in chemistry education (e.g. label) on European level for several years.

Finally, to complement the overall skills of the consortium, KIC-Malta provides specially developed expertise in stakeholders' analysis and management skills, and thus technical assistance in dissemination management and planning.

Taken together, the consortium features excellent institutional research capacity, project management expertise, commitment to process and product quality, and existing relations with key stakeholders, as well as ability and willingness to valorise the results.

The gathering of such a diverse group of institutions representatives enhanced the project greatly. It has allowed PHEXcel to always keep in mind the rich diversity of European higher education and to propose a framework and methodology that is not restrictive in character but that is addressed to all higher education institutions (universities, universities of applied sciences, business schools, arts academies, conservatoires etc.) that strive for excellence.

5. Plans for the Future

The plans of the PHExcel project for the future are to:

1. Continue the Dialogue on (Professional) Higher Education Excellence
2. Use the Expertise Gathered in Training Experts for Excellence
3. Gain more Experience and Implement the Methodology for Excellence

1. Continue the Dialogue on (Professional) Higher Education Excellence

Throughout the project, the partners have been involved in the latest debates on quality and excellence in higher education in Europe. This was particularly true with developments in the United Kingdom on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). At the same time, colleagues from quality assurance agencies have also been further reflecting on the concept of excellence and their own role in this respect. With the knowledge gathered within the project, partners plan to continue to contribute to the latest developments on excellence in Europe, based on our reflections around excellence itself, quality labels and support processes.

This is particularly enabled with the respective positions of the partners recognised as the **voice of their sector** and included in decision-making bodies, including EHEA structures such as the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) for EURASHE.

2. Use the Expertise Gathered in Training Experts for Excellence

When the project conducted pilot reviews on excellence, external experts were included in the review teams. These had to be briefed on the specificities of our work and of excellence as opposed to 'regular' accreditation and external quality assurance processes. Partners plan to harvest this experience in supporting the further development of experts that are called on to take part in external quality assurance and enhancement processes. This can have a beneficial impact through the open attitude that PHExcel promotes and the importance given to the integration with the world of work; two aspects that are not as largely present in current processes as we think is necessary.

This is made possible especially through two of the project partners that have **extensive experience** in the training of reviewers and their knowledge gathered in setting up quality assurance agencies geared towards the enhancement of quality.

3. Gain more Experience and Implement the Methodology for Excellence

Whilst the project has intensively reflected on the topic of excellence and the development of the framework and methodology it could not directly test the final proposal included in the *PHExcel Framework & Methodology*. The partners aim to gain more experience in the implementation of the proposed methodology and how this can support longer-term improvement in higher education.

When presenting our outcomes, several stakeholders, especially quality assurance agencies, have **expressed interest** in how this methodology could benefit the entire higher education community: staying committed to quality, looking beyond at excellence, having an open attitude, and reducing the practical burden on institutions.

6. Contribution to EU policies

The PHEExcel project and its outcomes respond directly to several action lines of the European Union:

- **Quality Assurance:** First and foremost, it addresses the need to ensure quality in higher education – it is however not limited to this. PHEExcel addresses the way in which institutions and programmes go above and beyond set thresholds of quality. In the initiative, we recognised the basis for quality assurance in the EHEA, the ESG, and aimed not to replace them in professional higher education, but on the contrary, to extend the reflection on quality and excellence to the professional processes of higher education.
- **Transparency in Higher Education:** Secondly, PHEExcel also directly addresses the need for transparency in higher education. The *PHEExcel Framework & Methodology* puts the involvement of all stakeholders at its centre. The involvement of students and the world of work in a reflection on excellence is key to transparency and accountability.
- **Recognition:** Thirdly, by promoting excellence, we strive for the recognition, not only of excellence in professional higher education, or professional higher education itself by all stakeholders, but of the quality and variety of the higher education provision in the EHEA. The PHEExcel project proposes a tool to institutions to continue their self-reflection and enhancement processes. Only by supporting the continuous improvement of higher education processes can recognition be achieved and be meaningful in the long-term.
- **New skills for new jobs:** Last but not least, by inciting institutions to go beyond set standards of quality, the PHEExcel framework encourages them to think ahead and offer the best possible education to students, offering better opportunities for students and learners to develop the best set of skills and competences to prepare them better for the world of work.

Additionally, supporting institutions that strive for excellence contributes to other European Union action lines.

At the centre of the PHEExcel understanding of excellence lays the intense integration with the world of work. It is exemplified by a sustained effort to develop the **Employability** of graduates within institutions and programmes offering professional higher education.

The **Knowledge triangle** is at the heart of professional higher education, with its integration with the world of work but also its special place in servicing the community. Therefore, when strengthening professional higher education by developing and enhancing excellence, we further support the knowledge triangle.

Whilst the project activities per se does not directly influence **Lifelong Learning in Higher Education**, the **Social dimension**, or **Curriculum development**, the **Governance** of institutions, or **Innovation & excellence in teaching**, institutions that use the *PHEExcel Framework & Methodology* have to reflect on all of these aspects. Indeed, lifelong learning is also a main role of professional higher education in general and is included in the excellence characteristics of the framework. The same is true for the social dimension of higher education; curriculum development, governance and innovation & excellence in teaching are also fundamentally part of the framework.

Finally, in the long-term, supporting institutions that strive for excellence has the potential to support **Mobility strategies/removal barriers** through its effect on transparency and the provision of information to students and learners, thus facilitating their choice for mobility. As mentioned previously, the topic of excellence has risen in recent years in **Funding** schemes put forward by authorities. Our contribution to the current debates on funding shows that the entire higher education community is indeed willing to go above and beyond quality. Our work has shown that excellence is inherently contextual and therefore not limited to world-renown institutions or high-end research; such funding schemes should therefore be open to all initiatives that support the continuous enhancement of the higher education provision.

